

Unravelling the 'War' on Terrorism: A Risk-Management Exercise in War Clothing?

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Since the 11 September terrorist outrages, policymakers have waxed lyrical about a 'war' on terrorism as the greatest challenge to international security. The word 'war' implies easily identifiable (normally state) adversaries, and dramatic military action producing decisive, highly visible results at the end. However, this 'war' is in fact more rhetorical than about interstate warfare. Like other rhetorical wars on drugs or crime, it has no visible end, and outcomes will be neither easily apparent nor decisive. This article addresses the conceptual difficulties of a rhetorical 'war' on terrorism from a perspective of risk management. Drawing on military issues in Afghanistan so far, it seeks to provide a more appropriate analytic prism for understanding such a 'war' where enemies are elusive networks, the aim is simply avoiding harm with no prospect of closure, and success is defined more by non-events than by what can be seen.

Introduction

IN LATE SEPTEMBER 2001, US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld observed that the 'war' on terrorism was something 'very, very different from what people think of when using the word "war" or "campaign". We need to fashion a new vocabulary and different constructs for what we are doing'.¹ This article argues that the language of risk management serves this purpose. To begin with, the use of 'war' terminology spawned inaccurate comparisons with war in its classical form rather than the more appropriate rhetorical variety. In the West, it fuelled what Sir Michael Howard termed a 'media-stoked frenzy' and unrealistic public expectations of visible, quick, decisive results. Classical war assumes a fixed set of identifiable physical (normally state) enemies, not amorphous terror networks. Furthermore, war

implies *seeking* positive outcomes with a finite end. The rhetorical war on terror, on the other hand, *avoids* negative futures with no prospect of closure: officials recently indicated that it was more important to constantly disrupt Al-Qaeda than to nab bin Laden. Yet even after shifting gears from classical to rhetorical war, key questions lie unanswered: How does one gauge success, and when does the war end? These inadequacies of 'war' terminology serve as a springboard for broadening the present article's core argument that the rhetorical 'war' against terrorism is more about managing risks than war. First, the guiding philosophy of risk management is anticipatory action to forestall adverse outcomes: a utilitarian moral calculus rather than a focus on guilt or justice. The 'war' on terror also exhibits these features. Second, risk management constantly monitors risks, taking action if necessary. This cyclical, open-ended process also characterizes a protracted struggle where disrupted terror networks regroup and new ones constantly emerge. There is neither a fixed foe nor the finite end point often associated with 'war'. Third, non-events like simply avoiding harm are the criteria for successful risk management. Outcomes will neither be apparent, decisive nor positive, as would be suggested by 'war'. A successful blitz on terror is also defined by non-events like preventing terrorist attacks. Combating terrorism involves political, military, diplomatic, financial, intelligence and police tools of statecraft. However, this article is limited to aspects of the military campaign in Afghanistan, attempting to develop an analytic perspective of risk management for addressing the rhetorical 'war' on terrorism.

'Terrorism': The Phenomenon and Its Physical Manifestation

Two levels of analysis are relevant to the 'war' on terrorism. The first comprises the rhetorical war against 'terrorism' as a phenomenon, somewhat akin to the 'war' on crime. The second involves more concrete warfare against bin Laden's Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan: almost a classical war. Ostensibly, each level has different criteria for success. The former defines success in terms of non-events and less visible goals, like preventing further terrorism. The latter entails more measurable results, such as the removal of the Taliban regime. President Bush famously wanted bin Laden 'dead or alive'.

Yet, as this article will show, results like capturing bin Laden and destroying the Taliban regime have been sidelined in Afghanistan in favour of less visible results such as preventing further terrorism generally. The two levels of analysis are interlinked. This article attempts to combine these two levels by

extrapolating aspects of risk management from military action in Afghanistan relevant to the broader campaign against international terrorism. By comparing this action with other rhetorical 'wars', such as those on drugs, it will argue that this rhetorical war on terror does not quite qualify as classical warfare but bears a far closer resemblance to risk management.²

A central feature of terrorism is the difficulty of defining its amorphous concept. Attempts to do so are often inconclusive – 'one person's terrorist is another's freedom fighter'. The US State Department report 'Patterns of Global Terrorism' defines terrorism as 'premeditated, politically motivated violence against non-combatant targets by subnational or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience'.³ Some additional elements would render this definition more complete and relevant to this article. Terrorism is not just what has happened, but also what might happen in the future – a risk, so to speak. The threat of terrorism is itself terrorism.⁴ Britain previously saw terrorism as merely part of a range of asymmetrical threats. Since the 11 September attacks, it has been elevated to a 'strategic risk' by Britain, prompting a new chapter to its *Strategic Defence Review* (SDR).⁵ Furthermore, Al-Qaeda's brand of terrorism deviates from the State Department's definition: it aims to destroy, not to influence an audience. This is discussed in further detail below. Terrorism is more a phenomenon or method of political violence than a clear set of adversaries. The USA's war on terror is open-ended and still ill-defined, further complicating analysis.

The Consequences of Using 'War' Terminology

President Bush's use of the word 'war' normally implies spectacular military action against fixed, easily identifiable adversaries and a clearly defined end point, with quick, visible, decisive results in a media age shaped by images of smart bombs in the Gulf War.⁶ As a result, the use of 'war', to describe the campaign against terrorism contains significant conceptual drawbacks. The context of modern war is traditionally violence between fixed enemies, particularly states. The current war on terror targets the Taliban, hardly an established state, and Al-Qaeda, a loosely organized, transnational network. Furthermore, fighting terrorism is more forward-looking and anticipatory than tackling state enemies. The nature of victory is fundamentally unclear. There will be no ceremonies of surrender on the battleship *Missouri* or Military-Technical Agreements, such as those that ended the Kosovo campaign. Instead, success will be defined by what does not happen rather than by what does. Notwithstanding, the classical 'war' terminology retains startling value because of its emotive, value-laden nature. It rallies the nation by emphasizing the scale of the threat.

The understanding of war in the West has been shifting from classical interstate 'war' to intrastate conflict and rhetorical wars on risk scenarios like drugs, crime and now terrorism. Indeed, James Lindsay remarked on the campaign against terror: 'this is more like the drug war'.⁷ Instead of the dominant interstate connotations outlined above, it makes more sense to use the word 'war' in this context to mean mobilizing resources against a dangerous activity, which can never be eliminated but can be reduced to a tolerable level.⁸ Still, terrorism is a more serious threat than other rhetorical threats like drugs and crime. So-called 'post-modern terrorism' involves all manner of organizations spouting causes from animal liberation to fundamentalist religious fanaticism.⁹ Enemies in other rhetorical wars – drug runners, for example – do not aim to destroy a 'host state', such as the USA; they aim to milk it. Al-Qaeda is more interested in destroying its host state altogether, possibly even with weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Bin Laden has described obtaining such weapons as a religious duty. While 'old style' terrorism is normally inclined to negotiations, 'new' terrorism is now seen as part of a new 'war' paradigm that takes a strategic campaign-oriented view of protracted violence rather than episodic efforts in the past.¹⁰ Unlike the 'coercive diplomacy' paradigm of terrorism, there is no proportionate relationship between levels of force employed and aims sought. Unrestrained by political concerns for public support or legitimacy, the aim is to inflict death and destruction, with no specific calls for concessions. The 11 September attacks were not followed by any such demands or by groups claiming responsibility. This 'war' paradigm, of course, is not completely new. Indeed, terrorists have often declared 'war' on the USA and considered themselves as 'armies'. President Clinton invoked the imagery and language of war by describing military retaliation after the 1998 US Embassy bombings as the 'first shot of protracted war',¹¹ suggesting that this 'war paradigm' is increasingly relevant. If terrorists are increasingly becoming a major security threat to democratic societies, those nations targeted should then consider terrorism more as a military problem than one for policemen and courtrooms,¹² especially since previous assumptions about deterrent measures like retaliation are now impotent against fanatics who welcome death. The focus is now on measures to reduce terror risks, and on applying force if necessary.

The rhetorical war on terrorism invokes the language of war as a semantic instrument for mobilizing public support but employs the vocabulary of risk management in explaining strategic options and outcomes. An *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* article usefully raised many interesting points of entry in what it called the 'quirky character of this new war'.¹³ These included difficulties of knowing the enemy, no clear definition of victory with invisible successes, and virtually no prospect that the war will be finally over and conclusively won. Unfortunately, that article did not offer an alternative notion to 'war'. The present article merely suggests risk management as a possible conceptualization.

It does not pretend to offer a definitive interpretation, for many prominent commentators – from James Der Derian to Lawrence Freedman¹⁴ – have offered their own convincing take on events.

What Is Risk Management?

Risk is defined as the possibility that an adverse state of reality may occur owing to human action or natural events. In theory, addressing the initiating activity can alter this reality. Intuitively, risk means danger in the future. Risk management may be broadly defined as a 'field of activity seeking to monitor, eliminate, reduce and generally control pure risks'.¹⁵ It is a set of ongoing activities including 'feedback mechanisms and continuing performance monitoring', with no finite point.¹⁶ 'Pure' risk denotes only the prospect of harm; 'speculative' risk entails the possibility of gain in return for accepting some harm. It is useful to differentiate between managing 'pure' and 'speculative' risk. For the former, success means simply the avoidance of damage or loss; while the latter means that consequences may range from spectacular gain to great loss.¹⁷ International security risks like terrorism clearly are 'pure' risk rather than 'speculative' risk. The latter is more commonly associated with the fields of investment banking and finance. For 'speculative' risks, objectives need to be clearly articulated in terms of risk and return involved. When managing 'pure' risk, the main aim is simply to avoid harm, making it difficult to establish a clear marker for this goal.

We are interested in addressing one of three levels identified for risk-management research: the global level dealing with international conflict.¹⁸ Unfortunately, no common usage of risk management is discernible in international relations, although the notion has crept into policy documents. One whole chapter of the US Department of Defense's (DoD) *Quadrennial Defense Review* (QDR) published on 30 September 2001 is entitled 'Managing Risk', a central 'strategic tenet' in defence policy. The DoD's 'risk-management framework' balances and mitigates an array of present demands and future risks, from operational force management and institutional risks to future challenges.¹⁹

The DoD framework is thus too broad for our purposes, since we are concerned more with reducing particular risks than with balancing them against others. After all, there is no single generic model of risk management applicable in all contexts.²⁰ In order to operationalize risk-management principles into a viable framework for our purposes, the notions described below guide the present analysis.

First, the centre of risk consciousness lies in the future. The potential event is a stimulus to action. Risk management is bound up with attempts to control

and colonize the future. This explains the rationale behind preventing potential terrorist attacks associated with the continued operations of Al-Qaeda.

Second, risk management aims not to totally eliminate problems like terrorism (which is unrealistic anyway) but to minimize or reduce the factors which lead to risks occurring. The factors identified in the present case are Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, whose existence constitutes the risk that further terrorism will be inflicted on Western populations. There is no grand narrative lying behind risk management as there is with war. Its moral calculus is utilitarian: simply avoiding further human harm, not bringing about desirable historical change or processes, or including other moral considerations of guilt or fairness. Although President Bush has couched the struggle in grandiose terms of 'good' against 'evil', the Afghan campaign has in fact been more utilitarian than one of retribution against evil.

Third, the prevalent value system is negative, that is, it is based more on trying to prevent something 'bad', like another terrorist outrage, than on attaining something 'good', such as properly sorting out Afghanistan. Results will be more invisible than visible. Risk management is 'minimalist' in nature, an open commitment with no quick, quantifiable results. This has implications for how we gauge progress in the 'war' on terror.

The Modes of Risk Management

Controlling the Future Through Proactive Actions

Despite its bloody and cruel connotations, modern war normally also presumes to bring about a desired outcome, such as the expulsion of Saddam Hussein from Kuwait or Nazi Germany's unconditional surrender. In contrast, one feature of risk management glimpsed in the rhetorical war on terror is that it is specifically aimed at avoiding unwanted future outcomes like further terrorism. Risk management is thus more proactive than war, going beyond mere punitive actions and attempting to avert future adverse consequences. Terrorism involves a key factor of uncertainty about the future, much more than assumed in past wars, where the aim was relatively clear: defeating a present enemy. The centre of consciousness for combating terrorism lies in the future: reducing the risk of its occurrence. Preventing the recurrence of terrorist actions has always been accorded a central place in the anti-terrorist agenda: for example, according to the National Commission on Terrorism, 'priority one is to prevent terrorist attacks'.²¹

Proactive risk management is a standard part of the managing process.²² It informs the military action against Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. The 'precautionary principle' of acting even without definitive evidence prevails. Fighting

terrorism refers to managing the risk of future terrorist outrages. UK Prime Minister Tony Blair's official statement on the commencement of Operation Enduring Freedom, while pointing out the 'dangers in acting', added that 'the dangers of inaction are much higher'.²³ US Defense Secretary Rumsfeld described pursuing terrorists as a 'proactive' policy, since it was impossible to defend against terrorists everywhere and at all times. He later stressed that recent actions such as Operation Anaconda were not 'retribution' or 'revenge' for 11 September, but rather were 'to protect our country and people from further attack': terrorists under fire in Afghanistan have less time to plan attacks on the USA.²⁴ Concern about averting adverse future outcomes is indicative of risk management. As Michael O'Hanlon mused, 'prevention rather than revenge should be the guiding principle for US military action' since the central objective is to 'reduce the probability and severity of future attacks'.²⁵

A risk-management approach to pre-empt and anticipate future metamorphosis of the terrorist threat seen in Afghanistan informs the broader rhetorical war on terror too. Terrorism is unpredictable, dependent on the smallest whim of individuals and loosely strung groups, compared to the relatively static hierarchy of states and militaries that interstate warfare implies. Planning should be based on several possible images of the future, not just a single one.²⁶ Although sometimes sensationalistic, public discussion of possible terrorist scenarios has been generally helpful in conceptualizing alternative sets of possible risks. After the 9/11 attacks, risk engulfs seemingly everything we do: from anthrax spores coming through the post to hijacked planes crashing into nuclear plants. As Homeland Security chief Tom Ridge conceded, 'there is a universe of potentials we have to deal with'.²⁷ In Rumsfeld's words, 'prepare for the unknown, uncertain, the unseen and the unexpected'.²⁸ The UK Ministry of Defence (MoD) consultations on a new chapter of its SDR give an inkling of emerging future-oriented concepts in dealing with international terrorism. British Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon wanted 'more emphasis on being proactive, pre-empting problems than waiting for them to come to us'.²⁹ Since 9/11, the tolerance for terrorist risks has greatly diminished. The nexus through which regimes like Iraq might pass WMD to Al-Qaeda is certainly an intolerable risk, despite the lack of convincing evidence on the matter. (At the time of writing, the promised intelligence dossier linking Saddam to Al-Qaeda has yet to materialize. No evidence that resembles what Washington presented to its NATO allies to tie Al-Qaeda to the 11 September attacks has been forthcoming.)³⁰ Blair upped the ante further by warning that action was necessary now, otherwise 'we will find out too late the potential for destruction'.³¹ Such warnings are serious because 'there is no margin for error and no chance to learn from any mistake', according to President Bush.³² One has to be proactive, for there is no chance to react. Declaring that he 'will not wait on events, while dangers gather', the tone of Bush's 'axis of evil' speech was proactive and anticipatory, indicative of a risk-manager's mind-set.

Not Focusing on Errant Individuals: No Right or Wrong

A risk-management approach to terrorism is based on a utilitarian moral calculus that replaces other moral criteria such as generosity, guilt or evil. It is managerial, not corrective or punitive. It does not focus on problems or causes, wrongdoing or the morality of erring individuals, but on reducing risks and avoiding harm to the population at large.

The Gulf War and the Kosovo campaign constantly dwelt on the evils of Saddam Hussein and Slobodan Milosevic. In contrast, while bin Laden presently remains at large, the focus in Washington thinking – at least in public – has shifted from an initial one on Osama the ‘evil one’ ‘dead or alive’ to one of simply managing the risks posed by Al-Qaeda. National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice stressed that ‘the most important thing is to disrupt the capability of this network to operate’.³³ To President Bush, ‘focusing on one person’ misunderstands the ‘scope of the mission’: ‘terror is bigger than one person’.³⁴ Admiral Robert Natter, commanding the Atlantic Fleet, felt that ‘the answer to this war is not that we have captured bin Laden, but rather keeping them running’.³⁵ Furthermore, terror networks like Al-Qaeda can function without bin Laden. Al-Qaeda is a loose grouping of people all over the globe who use modern technology to coordinate. New networked terrorist groups are less affected by the loss of individuals. They cannot be decapitated in the traditional sense of ‘personalized deterrence’; they can only be disrupted and have their effectiveness reduced. Eliminating bin Laden would only mean a stumble, not a pause in terrorist operations. He is only a ‘cog, albeit a large one, in a system that will outlast his demise’.³⁶ For this reason, Secretary Rumsfeld recently suggested it was ‘unwise’ to personalize the conflict in the way in which the Gulf War was personalized through the focus on Saddam Hussein.³⁷

A managerial approach to bin Laden has useful implications for the rhetorical war on terrorism. As with other rhetorical wars – such as the war on crime – networks are the predominant form, and singling out individuals will only divert scarce resources. The real focus should be on disruption, not decapitation.

Militarily Reducing Risks of Future Terrorism

Terrorism spawned from foreign countries and committed within another state’s borders stands the best chance of being called ‘war’. But the practical aim of retaliatory military action remains the same: more effective suppression indicative of risk management, rather than the total elimination evoked by the term ‘war’. Military force is probably a blunt instrument to use against terrorist organizations, and hierarchical military structure is unsuited for tackling networks. The use of military force might also be counterproductive, fuelling more hatred by killing civilians. Intelligence and police activities are needed to

prevent further attacks, not just bombing. But CIA chief George Tenet's Congressional testimony in February emphasized that 'intelligence will never give you 100% predictive capability on terrorist events'.³⁸ Leaving terrorist infrastructure intact will still leave states vulnerable to further attacks. As a former State Department counter-terrorism czar put it, 'there's no point addressing root causes with bin Laden. He doesn't like America. We are the root cause'.³⁹ Where terrorists want to destroy, not bargain, and intelligence and diplomatic cooperation cannot be foolproof, what we *can* do is manage the risks we know of.

Risk management, in this case, reduces the currently known factors that lead to risks occurring, such as the terrorist infrastructure in Afghanistan. Secretary of State Colin Powell suggests that 'we can reduce the likelihood of ... [terrorist] incidents if we go after those terrorist organizations'.⁴⁰ This is a form of active military containment, not always assuming the shape of war.

A Congressional bill of April 1996 dictates that the president 'use all necessary means including ... military force, to disrupt, dismantle, and destroy international infrastructure used by international terrorists'.⁴¹ The strategic military goal in Afghanistan is precisely this. As CIA chief Tenet recommended in his Congressional testimony, 'we have to minimize their ability' to commit further terrorist acts. By 'environment shaping', it is possible to 'shrink zones of chaos and terrorist sanctuary',⁴² such as Afghanistan, by destroying terror infrastructure and conditions there that make them conducive to terrorists, and to prevent new zones from forming. The ability of networks like Al-Qaeda to make opportunistic use of weak states makes it more imperative to do this, although it is unclear what impact modern communication technologies have on the need for quasi-virtual organizations to secure a territorial refuge.⁴³

Broadening the analysis beyond Afghanistan toward the rhetorical war on terror, adopting a military risk-management approach can make it more difficult for terrorists to organize and operate, but nothing will stop the most determined terrorists. This applies in the case of other rhetorical wars as well, especially the drugs war, where the temptation of huge profits will always draw new recruits. Certain physical manifestations of terror networks, such as training camps in Somalia or Yemen, can be destroyed, reducing the risk of terrorism, but not eliminating it. Furthermore, given the lack of anti-terror deterrence in the case of suicide bombers, the case for pre-emptive strikes grows.⁴⁴ Already, the UK MoD is hinting that its forces are to be given a new mission to find and destroy overseas terror networks threatening Britain. However, Afghanistan was a unique case, a militarily weak state isolated diplomatically and facing unprecedented international consensus. Other countries will not present the same set of relatively straightforward arguments for using force.

Defining Success

Success in 'war' is normally positively defined by desirable outcomes like defeating a fixed identifiable enemy or grand ideological causes. It has a visible finite point. However, most analyses of terrorism concur that it cannot be eliminated, only controlled and reduced; it is a problem that is not to be solved once and for all, but rather managed.⁴⁵ Success in risk management is negative in nature: it aims more at *avoiding* negative outcomes, rather than at *desiring* or *attaining* positively defined results. The key principle is that reduction of harmful actions is a gain, as this lessens the number of victims.⁴⁶ By focusing on avoidable harm, the risk-management approach fosters a negative, if not dystopian, outlook: understandably so, for the rhetorical war on terrorism is like the war on drugs, 'unwinnable'. The idea of 'winning' with 100% success in counter-terrorism is impossible given that there are so many possible points vulnerable to terrorist attack. Even positive results like the Taliban's demise provide no prospect of closure.

Unseen Successes

As President Bush's address to the Joint Session of Congress made clear, in addition to dramatic strikes, possible actions include covert operations, 'secret even in success'. People aren't going to see 'exactly what's taking place on their TV screens'.⁴⁷

Yet visible results on television have been assumed to be the context of modern war, especially since the Gulf War. The difficulty of measuring success in Afghanistan was exemplified recently by calls for Washington to produce numbers of enemy dead and hard evidence of success in Operation Anaconda. The stated aim of Operation Enduring Freedom has been to 'degrade and disrupt' terrorist networks, and to 'prevent further terrorism', not to produce body counts.⁴⁸ Disrupting and reducing the capability of terrorists has been central to current anti-terror strategies. The USA's 1997 National Security Strategy for a New Century declared its aim as being to 'prevent, disrupt and defeat terrorist operations before they occur'.⁴⁹ The key benchmark of successful risk management is simply avoiding harm. Success will be low-key, unpublicized, sometimes even unknown, involving the disrupting and quashing of networks here and there. There will be no grandiose victory parades. Disruption means targeting a terrorist organization and not only stopping one of its particular operations but rendering all of its activities more difficult. The ultimate goal is to make it more ineffective. Keeping bin Laden on the run helps keep him 'neutralized'. Senior US military officials feel that the recent Operation Anaconda impaired Al-Qaeda's ability to continue operations, with senior commanders on the run and mid-level commanders killed.⁵⁰ The USA's

constantly chipping away at Al-Qaeda can at least curtail the latter's ability to strike at will or operate with impunity. Secretary Rumsfeld will allegedly continue in this way 'until Americans can go about their lives without fear' and in 'relative freedom'.⁵¹ The criteria to be met in order to affirm that such a state has been attained remain unclear.

Events from Afghanistan suggest that a rhetorical war on terrorism is about managing risks, not aiming for absolutely zero terrorist attacks. Although FBI figures suggest that, by the end of December 2001, Al-Qaeda capabilities had diminished by no more than 30%, a triumph of risk management lies in the non-events, the number of days that go by without a terrorist outrage. In this sense, the campaign against terrorism mirrors rhetorical 'wars' waged on crime and drugs. Success must be defined in terms of 'reducing both the probability and consequences of further attack'.⁵² The benchmark of success will not be quantifiable, and much of the success will not be visible to the public eye. According to Secretary of State Powell, 'success may never come in the form that there is never another terrorist incident'. It may well take the form that 'we bring this under control and make it far more difficult for such organizations to exist'.⁵³ This is typical risk-management language, not an expression of the relative certainties of war. It is about managing insecurity, rather than providing total security, which – especially in this context of terrorism – is impossible. Victory is hard to define, and even more so when there is no clear conclusion of the battle.

An Open-Ended Process: Tackling the Hydra Effect

Such an end point has eluded operations in Afghanistan. The initial name of the military operation before it was changed to assuage Muslim sensitivities, 'Infinite Justice', suggests the type of operation it will be. Army Secretary Thomas White noted that it was difficult to 'draw a finite box' expecting things to be completed by certain dates.⁵⁴ Tony Blair urged 'patience' and digging in for the 'long haul'.⁵⁵ Despite the collapse of the Taliban, US-led forces have had to constantly attack regrouping Al-Qaeda and Taliban elements. In November and January, the Zawar Khili cave complex was struck repeatedly after attempts to reconstitute Al-Qaeda were observed in the area.

In March, Operation Anaconda reminded the world that the conflict was not yet over. British officials warned that Al-Qaeda remnants posed a continuing threat to Britain. Taliban and Al-Qaeda fighters are arguably adopting classic guerrilla tactics, though guerrillas normally do not pose international security risks. From a risk-management approach, managing the risks they pose entails constant monitoring, and taking repeated action if necessary. Such actions as we have seen – the toughest and bloodiest to date – even after the fall of the Taliban, suggest that the endgame is far from over. British Defence Secretary Hoon described the latest deployment of Royal Marine Commandos to

Afghanistan as 'open-ended'.⁵⁶ If Al-Qaeda attempts to regroup and strike again, Bush has said that he wants the USA to respond with a 'sustained, tireless, relentless campaign' to keep the terrorists on the run, adding that 'we're going to stay at it for however long it takes'.⁵⁷ These vague criteria for measuring military progress in managing terror risks – disrupting terror networks and keeping the terrorists on the run – leave open the possibility that more action will follow assessments that terrorists once again are capable of causing harm.

The nature of the Afghan campaign offers risk-management lessons for the rhetorical war on terrorism. Encouraged by the terminology of 'war', the prevalent strand of thinking about counter-terrorism is an erroneous tendency towards absolute solutions and talk of quickly eradicating terrorism, rather than seeing the problem as something to be managed through a more long-term process.⁵⁸ President Bush's remarks that 'this is not an instant gratification war' aptly describe a process of risk-management, where the finishing line is not easily apparent.⁵⁹ In risk management, it is essential to constantly assess the effectiveness of measures taken. This is a cyclical and ongoing process rather than a linear progression toward definitive end goals. Such a process is never complete, as new risks are always emerging or old risks are reconstituted. In sum, the process does not establish a definitive conclusion.⁶⁰ Policy should not be gauged in terms of definitive end goals but rather in terms of this ongoing process of risk management.

Perhaps we should see the 'war' on terrorism in light of other interminable, unwinnable rhetorical wars, in which a similar lack of clarity of mission and the 'hydra effect' predominate.⁶¹ With US forces deployed from Georgia to the Philippines and talk of action against Iraq in the terror war, demands are being made both in Congress and in the media for the Bush administration to better define new missions, to specify how long they will last and to clarify objectives.⁶² However, counter-terrorism should not be too obsessed with flavours of the moment or specific time-frames, for there are always new threats ready to replace bin Laden – the so-called 'hydra effect'. Counter-terrorism is about constantly being on the lookout, managing known terrorist risks as well as newly materializing ones. As RAND's Ian Lesser reiterated, 'terrorism as a phenomenon is so diffuse with so many points of risk that 100 percent success in counter-terrorism is not realistic'.⁶³

Terrorist networks are notoriously elusive and lack the hard physical infrastructure that states possess. They are also many and diffuse, and one easily springs up to replace another. President Bush's speeches emphasize that 'patience will be one of our strengths' in a 'task that does not end'.⁶⁴ Managing terror risks has no endgame because of the need to constantly disrupt and harass terrorist cells, reducing the risks they pose. Al-Qaeda will not be totally eliminated despite its Afghan setbacks; it will only be weakened. Attempts are already under way to reconstitute it elsewhere, using such tools of globalization

as the Internet and e-mail encryption. Meanwhile, other terror networks can arise. Homeland Security Chief Tom Ridge further warned that coping with the threat from Al-Qaeda or other terrorist organizations would be a 'permanent condition'.⁶⁵

Conclusion

Employing 'war' terminology has had several consequences for the campaign against terror. It has focused attention on military actions against easily identifiable state enemies, with the aim of attaining clearcut, decisive, positive results. Two factors suggest why such implications have misled efforts to understand this war. First, this 'war' is more rhetorical than a classical interstate war: it has no defined end point and is unwinnable. Second, despite the high profile of military force in Afghanistan, this rhetorical war exhibits more features of risk management than of warfare: the philosophy of 'anticipationism' informs military action against Al-Qaeda, seen as a precautionary measure to prevent further terror attacks. The moral calculus is utilitarian, seeking to avoid harm rather than desiring positive outcomes or addressing questions of guilt or justice. Managing risks of terrorism is an open-ended endeavour against hydra-headed enemies, where results are neither quickly achieved nor readily apparent. In sum, a risk-management approach explains these aspects of the 'war' on terrorism better than the idea of 'war' itself.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- * Yee-Kuang Heng is a Doctoral Student at the LSE working on the concept of risk management and international security. He is grateful to anonymous referees and the editor for comments on an earlier draft of this article. E-mail: yeekuanguheng@yahoo.com. The publication of the article was supported by the Berghof Foundation for Conflict Research, Berlin, as part of *Security Dialogue's* series on 'Resolving Modern Conflicts'.
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